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SEEING AMERICA*

The study of the history of these United States in the light of their industrial and economic development is rapidly beginning to displace the old system of examination under which the political and martial features of that story were given prominence out of all proportion to their relative importance in the growth of our national institutions. It is likewise cause for genuine gratification to all those unbiased students of our country who desire to view, in just proportion and true perspective, the feature of this complex and variegated national life, that the part played by the South and West in American history is at last beginning to receive both careful scrutiny and minute study. The combination of these two impulses, commendable each in itself, is found in the work which occupies my present consideration. In the perusal of these volumes, which have appeared within the present year and have attracted the attention of the country in a more than ordinary degree, we go a-voyaging and a-journeying through America from the early days of the rude and the primitive to the present era of the scientific and advanced modes of travel. There is at once romantic charm and sober reality in this journey across the plains and across the centuries, over the natural barriers to advance and over the recalcitrant obstacles to the progress of civilization. We live again the life of the Red Man, the *voyageur*, the hunter, the trapper, the *coureur-de-bois*, the pioneer. We march southward, and westward—ever westward toward the setting sun—carrying in one hand the weapons of the conqueror, in the other the arts and the crafts of civilization. Before us, in wavering outline, moves the vast wave-fringe of the frontier—reproducing again and again, at each successive advance, the slow march of progress, from savagery to enlightenment.

**A History of Travel in America.* Showing the Development of Travel and Transportation from the Crude Methods of the Canoe and Dog-sled to the Highly Organized Railway Systems of the Present; together with a Narrative of the Human Experiences and Changing Social Conditions that accompanied this Economic Conquest of the Continent. By Seymour Dunbar. With maps, colored plates, and other illustrations reproduced from early engravings, original contemporaneous drawings, and broadsides. In four volumes. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. \$10 net.

In this great journey, which is but recently ended in America's story, the battle of civilization was fought with eyes little sharpened by the great exigencies of the future. The pressure of immediate needs, the imperative call for the satisfaction of wants that must be instantaneously met—these immitigable conditions of pioneer civilization have left an ineradicable impression upon our social and economic life. It is one thing to build for the moment, to meet the pressing necessity of the hour; it is quite another to lay down great interlocking systems of trans-continental communication adequate to the needs of the present and potential for the needs of the future.

The author of these fascinating volumes is not carried away by a natural enthusiasm for his enthralling subject into purblind indifference to the temporary and transitory character of the economic beginnings upon which the greater transportation systems of the future must rest. Such clear-sighted consideration prompts the conclusion:—

“It therefore appears that the underlying thought and basic plan of the inexperienced pioneers, out of which grew the system they made and bequeathed to us—and which we are still using—is not altogether such a thoughtful and economic plan as fits our later desire and determination. A conflict between old conditions and new ideas has resulted. Various methods and practices which developed out of the pioneer procedure have been outgrown, and no longer fit the age into which they have survived. We are now seeking to rid ourselves of the undesirable parts of our inheritance, with resolution so to do, and are likewise trying to avoid the making of similar mistakes while dealing with the same large subject.”

Travel, in a word, follows its own law of evolution. The man who paddled his canoe could no more foresee the hydroplane than Daniel Boone could previsage the vestibuled limited. Nor would it even be possible for this present generation to build a fully adequate system of transportation to stand the crucial tests of time and progress without a vision into the long, long future. Yet a complete and detailed knowledge of the past, with the abundant lessons of mistake and failure, as afforded in part through the volumes under examination, promises to assist us in coping with the insistent problems of the present, and in suggesting the application of more rational and soundly based principles to the affairs which point to the future.

It is eminently worthy of remark that "the travel history of the American people has a world importance perhaps exceeded by no other narrative of human activities"; and that is in large measure due to the preëminently significant circumstance that "America was the only habitable and highly desirable region on the earth at the beginning of the modern era which offered a practically limitless expanse for the testing of new travel processes." For nearly a century and a half from the time of the establishment of the first permanent settlements along the Atlantic coast, very little was done to improve the ordinary conditions of travel and transportation. Travel ranged regularly north and south—the incursions to the westward were the flights of the adventurers into the unknown, in search of the mysterious, the strange, the fascinating remote. Yet as these adventurous spirits plunged deeper and deeper into tangled forests and dense wildernesses, they left settlers in their wake impelled through life's needs to establish means of communication with the more settled sections to the eastward. Slowly and by degrees, yet none the less surely, was being developed the characteristic American passion for speed and a short-cut to destination. With the Revolution, the establishment of the confederation of the colonies, and the subsequent territorial expansion of the American nation, notably through the Louisiana Purchase, came a fuller popular recognition of the need for communal recognition of the herculean task of the subjugation of a continent.

Beginning with the year 1785, "old methods and conditions went to the scrap heap, and the world, as we bump against it, was built all over again." In contrast to Europe, with its innumerable states, and their conflicting interests and continual rivalries, America presented in her unity and continental being an incomparable subject for social, economic, and industrial organization on a colossal scale. Mr. Dunbar points out that during the period of eighty years from 1788-9 to 1868-9, there were five events, epochal in the history of American transportation, which, singularly enough, followed one another at intervals of almost exactly twenty years. These five events were:—

The governmental organization of the Ohio country and the Northwest Territory, and the beginning of a general migration to those regions, in 1787-1789.

A general public recognition of the value of steam as a means of propulsion, in 1807-1809.

The beginning of the railway building period, in 1828-1829.

Discovery of gold in the West and the general rush across the plains, in 1848-1849.

Completion of the first transcontinental railway, in 1869.

One, perhaps, can best take account of the early conditions of the travel and the forces which set that stream in motion by studying the great wanderings of the peoples from Pennsylvania into Virginia, thence into the Piedmont region of North Carolina, and somewhat later into Tennessee and Kentucky, during the period from 1725 to 1785. In the study of this period, the author has given clear and satisfactory portrayal of the conditions of frontier life, the habits of the people, and their modes of travel (Vol. I, chapters viii, ix, x). But there are certain basic facts in this first great movement of westward expansion which have wholly escaped the attention of Mr. Dunbar, and deserve especial consideration. Of the early explorations of Daniel Boone, we are told that his "speculation regarding the country that lay beyond the mountains," as well as his desire for "freedom of movement and wide areas for action," are believed to have "resulted in a number of extensive trips toward the west for exploring and hunting purposes that may have begun as early as 1760, some of which were made in company with other men and some alone. But of these half legendary expeditions nothing certain can be said."

It is noteworthy that Mr. Dunbar makes no statement of having studied the records preserved among the Draper manuscripts at Madison, Wisconsin. Had he taken pains to examine the manuscript biography of Boone, by the late Lyman C. Draper, for example, he would have escaped the error of stating that, of these early expeditions of Boone, "nothing certain can be said."

The failure to study the original sources dealing with this momentous episode in our national history in the period of expansion is clearly responsible for the errors into which Mr. Dunbar has fallen. In regard to the mission of Boone to the Cherokees, as the confidential agent of the land company organized by Judge Richard Henderson (called *James* Henderson by Mr. Dunbar), it is stated (Vol. I, p. 134): "There is no story of what took place between him [Boone] and the chiefs of the nation, but regarding several factors that led to the result of the meeting a reasonable certainty can be entertained." The fact is that the

negotiations were first conducted by Boone with the Cherokees through the agency of James Robertson, the leader of the Watauga settlement; and it was Robertson who secured from the Cherokees their consent to sell their title to the desired territory. The actual preliminary negotiations were conducted by Col. Richard Henderson and Col. Nathaniel Hart, who personally visited the Cherokees at their Otari villages. The Treaty of Sycamore Shoals, on March 14-17, 1775, was personally conducted by Col. Henderson with Atta-Kulla-Kulla and other chieftains of the Cherokee tribe. Despite the conventional story that Boone conducted the treaty, the facts—as adduced by a mass of contemporaneous documents to which I have access—are that Boone was not present at the Sycamore Shoals when the treaty was formally promulgated; for he had already been sent forward with thirty axemen, in the employ of the land company, now known as the Transylvania Company, to cut out the path afterwards famous in American history as the “Wilderness Road.”

A remarkable account of the difficulties and perils of travel is given in full, in the diary of William Calk, who accompanied the party of Judge Henderson on their westward march. An even more remarkable and detailed account of that journey is found in the diary of Judge Henderson himself, the original of which is in the Draper collection of manuscripts at Madison. The history of this entire movement, its causes and results, has recently been set forth in two papers by the present writer.* Additional information is accessible in “Boonesborough,” by George W. Ranck, No. 16 of the Filson Club Monographs.

A singular omission in a work of this comprehensive nature is that of the founding of the city of Nashville, Tennessee, and the remarkable boating expeditions of Donelson and others which made it possible. No better illustration of the conditions, hardships, and dangers of winter travel during the pioneer period can be found than the voyage of the men sent with corn from Boonesborough, Kentucky, by Col. Henderson in 1780, and the simultaneous journey of Donelson and his companions in the good ship “Adventure.” These carefully planned undertakings, engineered by Col. Henderson, and supported by the march overland of James Robertson, constitute remarkable illustrations

* *The Creative Forces in Westward Expansion*, in the *American Historical Review*, October, 1914; *The Occupation of Kentucky (1775)*, in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, December, 1914.

of all the conditions representative of the pioneer travel, by land and by water, of that period of wilderness transportation.* In this connection, it should be pointed out that Mr. Dunbar has neglected important sources of information in failing to consult the *Journals of Bishop Asbury*, unusually rich in descriptions of the conditions of frontier travel extending over many years, during the latter part of the eighteenth and early years of the nineteenth centuries; and the *Diary of Stephen Austin*, with its vivid description by an eye-witness of the migration over the Wilderness Road in the early period of its use as a pioneer thoroughfare.

The work of Mr. Dunbar in the preparation of this work, and in its execution, is worthy of high praise. I cannot pursue now the story in all its phases—the development of the use of steam, the invention of the steamboat given with great detail, the march of travel across the western plains, the rise, progress, and decline of the industry represented by the Mississippi River steamboat, the history of the dispossession of the Indians with all its attendant cruelties and injustices, the growth and extension of the American railway system, the invention of the flying machine, and topics of like importance. It is enough to say that Mr. Dunbar has written clearly, effectively, charmingly, not only a history of travel in America: he has written a history of the American people of a remarkable and unique type—a social, industrial, and economic history. It is a labor of many years and indefatigable research. No such remarkable and representative set of illustrations, exhibiting in themselves the history of American travel, has ever before been got between the covers of a single American work. The title I have chosen is not inaccurate—in perusing these volumes we are “seeing America,” sanely, vividly, comprehensively, from the earliest recorded period down to the present time.

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*A paper, detailing the true story of the movements, was recently read by me before the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, at its annual convention in Nashville, Tenn. This paper will be published in the next issue of the *Tennessee Historical Magazine*.